

Fall 1983

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Recommended Citation

Foata, Anne (1983) "The Symbolic Structure of Andrew Lytle's *The Velvet Horn*," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol5/iss1/3>

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The Symbolic Structure of Andrew Lytle's *The Velvet Horn*

Anne Foata

Implied in the very title of *The Velvet Horn* and emphasized throughout the narrative by the mythic allusions of its central intelligence, a network of symbolic representations, all bearing upon the central image of edenic wholeness, is intricately interwoven in the narrative structure of Andrew Lytle's novel.¹ Their purpose is to confer the authenticity and immutability of an archetypal experience on the limited events of both the main and the secondary (or "enveloping") actions of the novel (the story of Lucius Cree's initiation into manhood and of his mother and uncle's fall from innocence some twenty years earlier), to draw them out of the human time and endow them with eternal significance. For Lytle, indeed, at that stage of his writing career which witnessed the nine-year composition of *The Velvet Horn* and the "accidental" reading of Jung, Zimmer, and Neumann,² there is no human action, and hence no fictional one, that is not at the same time representative of an archetypal experience. Jung warns at the beginning of *Psychology and Alchemy*³ that the way to knowledge goes round in circles, and this seems to have inspired the narrative structure of the novel; instead of being released chronologically, the narrative information keeps spiraling up and down in time, joining the main action to the "enveloping" one and to myth, and following the most circuitous path around the momentous secret of the Croleigh siblings' incest. Backtrailing his own way through both actions down to their mythic sources, the perceptive reader will eventually round off the narrative process and reach the full significance of the novel.

I

Incest as the dominating symbol

When reading a novel, especially one "whose subject lies in the past," Lytle urges the reader to look for its "central image, which

might also be a dominating symbol, placed at the post of observation and at the center of the author's seeing eye."⁴ This symbol, which he also calls the "controlling image," may be a symbol proper, a theme, or a typical behavior; its purpose is to "represent the entire action [of the novel] by compressing into a sharp image or succession of images the essence of meaning" (WN 185), thus to unify the different levels of significance. Moreover, writes Lytle, it reduces the "risk of misreading," of reading "into a book [one's] own preconceptions and preoccupations" (WN 186).⁵

In *The Velvet Horn* the "dominating symbol" is incest; to Lytle it appears as "one of the oldest forms of search and conflict" of fallen mankind, a "refusal to engage in the cooperating opposites that make life" in an effort "to return to the prenatal equilibrium of innocence and wholeness" (WN 184). Incest as a means to and end of a quest for wholeness does not need to be literal, or carnal (although it happens to be so in the novel); it is above all a "spiritual condition," and as such, according to Lytle, quite "a constant upon the Southern scene," dominated by the institution of the family (WN 184). It is therefore not so extravagant a metaphor as it would seem at first sight, but the manifestation of a universal unconscious nostalgia for paradise.

In the interpretation which Lytle advances of the biblical fall, incest characterizes the second of the "three stages of Eden as symbol of the world drama":

Adam alone, the hermaphrodite, is the entire creature isolated within himself, the stasis of innocence, the loss of which is the beginning of action. When the woman is taken out of his side (symbolic: not according to nature as we know it), the separation begins the perpetual conflict. Incest is the symbol for this next stage. The third is the continuing action of the drama, the efforts to fuse the parts into a wholeness which is complete knowledge. The symbol for this is the serpent, the old intruder. But there is another symbol for wholeness, the *uroboros*, the serpent eating its tail, lying about in the waters of chaos. This is one of the oldest symbols, and out of it comes the only perfect figure, the circle. . . . To shift the image, Adam within his form contains the *uroboros*, both the masculine and feminine parts. Once separated, the feminine in Adam becomes Eve, the masculine the Serpent. All the goods and evils grow out

of this separation. (WN 187)

Thus incest, as Lytle understands it, symbolizes the phase of separation and conflict, but it could also serve as the dominating symbol for the third act of the world drama, the desperate efforts of mankind to restore its shattered wholeness. Growing out of the all-perfect form of love which is the love between brother and sister, "the identity-in-essence of the separate-in-form" (111), incest absorbs and symbolizes "every kind of love which the separation had scattered throughout the world" (WN 188).⁶ In *The Velvet Horn*, it is represented under various forms and experienced by almost all the characters; for all of them and under its various disguises, however, it leads to catastrophe and death, the ultimate reunion with oneself in the bosom of the earth, the mother of all being.

Duncan and Julia's relationship, underlined throughout the novel in its excessive closeness, is supported by all the other forms of "spiritual incest" that may exist within a family. All the Croleigh siblings seem to have shared this kind of sweeping affection for each other: Jack and Beverly together in the great forest "made two halves of a harmonious whole" (108); Dickie, on being wrongly accused of having "never been one of us" (212), shows his stump and tells how he lost his leg for love of his brothers locked in a deadly embrace at the entrance to Parcher's Cove, "Duncan and Beverly mashed together . . . forever one" (213). Significant of the excessive attachment they bear their little sister, there is the three brothers' "rough circle" around Julia asleep in Pete Legrand's arms (138), Jack's not too mournful remark that Joe Cree's death "has brought [them] all together again" (193), and the jealousy that tortures him during Joe's wake on catching Pete Legrand's adoring glance upon Julia. ("Damn his eyes. . . . Damn Legrand. Damn jealousy, that old heart wound," 244.)

Julia's maternal love for Lucius is of the same excessive nature: witness her flashback on the sucking infant (182), her fierce reaction toward Joe Cree when he takes Lucius to the woods to teach him his trade (189), the long wail of sorrow and relief that greets his return from the Peaks during the wake: "Aye, what a wail. Double love. Double trouble" (185), old Aunt Nanny comments, while Jack fully understands its significance and fears that "he would have to name what he saw there" (185). It shows all the passionate ambiguity of its nature when she tries to

dissuade him from seeing his Aunt Amelie, "no mother but a woman using her charm" (300) and when she finally rejects him for marrying Ada Belle Rutter (370). Beverly's devotion to his mother was of the same kind, and losing her in the boat explosion that made them all orphans, he chose to withdraw into the great forest and relive the edenic harmony and unity with nature among the tamed beasts of Parcher's Cove.

Parallel to the excessive closeness of the different couples of the novel, there is the strange relationship between Ada Rutter and her idiot son Othel. This relationship is paradigmatic of a pure incestuous situation, that of the archetypal couple mother and son-lover, endlessly regenerating itself in the spiral of auto-fecundation, the androgynous conception and birth *par excellence* (see IV below).

Outside the family, the most common endeavor to restore wholeness is sexual love, during that blinding instant "when flesh and spirit surcharge each other, in that brief annihilation of every separate faculty, the annihilation being the act of fusion, the disembodiment within the body, which was the suspension in chaos before the fall" (WN 188). Thus Duncan's wild dance around Amelie on the night of Julia's wedding, similar to the strutting and treading of the mating turkeys on pages 128-29, is the prelude to an "incestuous" coming together, a "blind search, forever seeking, forever thwarted, never recovering what he has lost, the half that will make him whole" (206). When after their marriage Amelie rides through the enemy lines to join him in his guerilla warfare against the Union troops, the violence of their desire makes them "come together like two parts which make a whole" (33). In that brief flashing moment that annihilates all consciousness, the lovers abolish time and get a taste of eternity (WN 188). Unfortunately, this state of grace never lasts and "the two made one" always end up by being separate again; this is the bitter lesson Lucius has to learn during his wedding night, looking at Ada Belle asleep in his arms, their bodies still entwined by the "single touch" of desire which had made them come together, but now "remote and separate" in the early light of dawn (352-53). For Jack, the scholar of the Croleigh family, it is beyond doubt that Adam was quite satisfied with his androgynous nature, after God had created him "male and female" (Genesis 1:27), since to rob him of his rib that was to become Eve, God had had to "trick" him (so he says) into the "deep sleep" of Genesis 2:21 (112). That the voice uttering this

unorthodox hypothesis on the creation of Eve might have been Beverly's, or Dickie's, as plausibly as Jack's (in the flashback of "The Water Witch," 116),⁷ is ultimately of minor importance, since the yearning for wholeness is equally distributed among all the Cropleighs and voiced—for the purpose of narrative unity—by the central intelligence of the novel, Jack Cropleigh, its "spiritual hermaphrodite".

II

Jack Cropleigh, the spiritual hermaphrodite

In "The Working Novelist and the Mythmaking Process," Lytle writes that "everybody was the hero and heroine [of *The Velvet Horn*], but only Jack Cropleigh, the brother and uncle, could represent them all, for Jack, the spiritual hermaphrodite, contained them all in his mind. He alone could suffer the entire myth" (WN 189). In order to stress Jack's sexual ambiguity, Lytle first granted him an ambivalent parental function. Jack indeed appears as a father figure, a "surrogate" for his own father who "went up in fire and smoke" on the Mississippi; he runs the family estate, provides the extra money by raising mules, sends Dickie to medical school, fulfills the many public and social duties that become his position as the "surrogate" head (again, because the eldest son forfeited his right) of a locally well-known and respected family (duties such as organizing and hosting the county fall hunt); as Lucius's maternal uncle, he also appears as the mentor in the latter's initiation rites and only abandons his role once the initiation is complete and his guidance has become useless. At the same time his loving care, his anxious concern for the family, is that of a mother, or, as he says himself, of "an old hen who has hatched out guineas, dropping my wings and clucking them home to roost" (18). He actually presents himself dressed as a woman on one occasion, presiding over the nuptial ceremony of a stubborn jackass, which elicits Lucius's mocking address: "Old woman, can you tell me where Jack Cropleigh is?" (353)

Endowed with an almost unlimited capacity for love and abnegation, he nevertheless stands forth in all the bulky might of his manliness. He is a man above the average height and energy, a great amateur of good cheer, and of whisky, which he celebrates throughout the novel as a unique case of the conjunction of opposites, "fire and water fused, for once the opposites conjoined

until even dull matter shows some spirit" (256). Rather partial to obscenities and bawdy *double entendre*, he relishes the society of his compeers, the hardy neighbors come to the wake (see Sud Pilcher's mock trial on 250-55)—his cousin Eddie Dunbaugh, Pete Legrand's superintendent Slowens, and others—with whom he can abandon the formal manners required by the presence of ladies and commune in the easygoing brotherhood of males. He may have once contemplated following the common fate of mankind and founding a family with Adelaide Pilcher (218), but he gave up the idea to devote his time and life to his own family. A confirmed bachelor by the time of the main action (he is in his middle forties), "the home place," as Dickie remarks to him, "has deprived [him] of a home" (218).

Behind the nobility of his self-denial, however, there hides an innate mistrust of the woman, which would prove that for all the good reasons he puts forward to justify his celibacy—and some of them are indisputably good—he also, like Beverly and Duncan, might have been attracted by the blinding illusion of androgynous wholeness. By way of proof, one can mention his unflattering comments on the old wives who wear the breeches in their households ("Put them on a woman and they bulge in the wrong places," 54), on the "well-loved" younger ones that one clasps on one's breast and who remain "strange" and "forever elusive" (218), on the widows that "won't pull sangle in the shafts" (44), a remark made by another, of which he does not disapprove, on the mother who must be extirpated from the son so that he may grow and become a man (76), in one word, on the Woman, "the mother of trouble" (44). She appears to him with the stony look of the Gorgon, for "folly it is, for a man to think he can look at a woman straight on and ever focus again" (202). It was the look he saw in Julia's innocent blue eyes gazing up into Joe's on the day of their wedding that "minted the two silver coins" that were to be put on Joe's eyes during his wake nineteen years later, "round as a full moon, with a lady in each" (202). To the Woman, "sister, wife, mother . . . widow," forever "pure, untouched, immaculate" (256) but lethal, the man forever remains a stranger, "a homing stranger" (164). To Jack, as to Henry Brent in *A Name for Evil* (without, however, bringing his natural animosity to the latter's extreme limits) the Woman finally appears as the major obstacle to man's edenic search for happiness.⁸

It was thus essential that Jack be given the yearning for Adamic

wholeness to the same degree as his brothers in order to be able both to understand and to experience their illusion—or at least to be strongly tempted to experience it, as 'The Trace' passage of "The Water Witch" section shows—to express it by underlining its archetypal universality, and finally to die for it, after convincing Lucius of its lethal qualities and having him accept the division and the duality inherent in human nature. Brought to mind by Jack's overwhelming stature and function in the novel are some of the "victim-savior" figures of antiquity (WN 190): the androgynous Dionysus whose role he seems to be emulating during the bacchanalia on the Peaks of Laurel, the no less androgynous Hermes whose many different shapes he seems to be adopting at one moment or another of the story (there is a hint of the psychopomp on pages 261 and 363, and more than a hint in his role as guide in the initiation ceremonies of the god of revelation, the trickster; and, as Mercurius, of the transmuting substance in the alchemical operation of the conjunction of opposites),⁹ all of these figures finally merging into the figure of Christ, the "new Adam" who will redeem fallen mankind and bring it back to edenic wholeness and bliss. Despite the Christic death and transfiguration that is granted to him at the end of the novel—or perhaps we should more correctly say in accordance with it, because here too we might point out the many ambiguous, unorthodox attributes of his Christ figure which make of him the androgyn of the Gnostics and the Alchemists rather than the Christ of the Gospels—Jack fundamentally remains the "spiritual hermaphrodite," whose secret nature and longings are fully revealed to him during his vision in Joe Cree's open grave.

III

Jack Croleigh's vision

Jack's vision is an epiphany, the fulgurant revelation of a hitherto hidden truth, and as such, it stands as the keystone of the symbolic structure of the novel. Lytle chose to represent it in the fashion of a "hierophany," or "sacred marriage," that is, of the "chemycal marriage" of fire and water that the alchemists have vainly attempted to achieve through their experiments in order to produce the perfect being who would abolish all opposites:

[Jack] took another [step] and tumbled down.

With a soft thud he struck the bottom of an earthen box. . . . Without turning he could see himself on each side of himself, moving into himself; but before he could merge, the slick light revolved and showed the faces now of Julia and now of Duncan but with his body, moving towards and away from each other; and when they were about to meet, met his body between. And then her arms reached across him, wavering like water, into Duncan's which were flames. Her hair overflowed him tangling in the heat draught. The fiery hands fumbling burnt the doeskin which clothed her. Their charred ashes sank down as she moved into Duncan with the stilled motion of a waterfall. For an instant the flame of him turned from red to blue. He saw the terrible suction drawing them together, as the ashes sank into the green of his vision and put it out. (259-60)

Jack sees Duncan and Julia's conjunction as growing out of his own body, sees his body as though dividing itself, one side becoming Duncan and the other Julia, then merging again, "moving into himself" again and once again restoring his own unity. In the alchemical operation which is thus performed within and through his body, Jack is Mercurius, the hermaphroditic principle of the transmutation.¹⁰ In the symbolism of numbers which Lytle had already evoked in his representation of the hexagonal garden in *A Name for Evil*, "one becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth," as it is stated in the Axiom of Maria Prophetessa, the basis of all alchemical operation,¹¹ for Mercurius who is the transforming substance of the *conjunctio* is also its resulting product, the all-perfect being under its different names, the Rebis, the Stone or Lapis, *trinus et unus*, Christ.¹²

In Jack's vision the alchemical representation of Duncan and Julia's incest as a fusion of fire and water through the agency of Mercurius, who contains them both in his own body, is one of the many clusters of images of wholeness in the novel (here the alchemical symbolism of the masculine and feminine numbers, of Hermes-Mercurius and its various representations, the stag, the unicorn, the ass, etc.). Other images center more specifically around various myths of creation, or rather around the different stages inside the biblical myth. We may notice indeed how the edenic evocations of the Garden with Adam, Eve, and the Serpent

always fade into the overwhelming figure of an androgynous Adam, who eventually disappears himself into the uroboric wholeness of uncreated matter, that is, of the self-procreating origins of the universe. It is as though Lytle were reading the book of Genesis backwards, first disposing of Eve along with Eden, then of the androgynous Adam himself, to be left with the Serpent embracing its tail in the waters of chaos, which is a version of the *tehom* of the origins, according to Genesis 1:2.

IV

The mythic setting and its symbols

In *The Velvet Horn*, the edenic representations proper, as in *The Long Night* and in *A Name for Evil*, focus on the image of the forest still densely covering the region of the Cumberland Rim where the action of the novel is set. Having retained much of its original wilderness, still teeming with game and other animals, it appears as a refuge from the ills of an urbanizing and industrializing society, an antidote to the world of business represented by Pete Legrand (who is "plow[ing] up the big meadow," 110) and Joe Cree. Beverly, Duncan, Julia wander in it and their illusion is to share in the prelapsarian unity of all created nature, its "prenatural equilibrium of innocence and wholeness" (WN 184). The forest is further metonymized into a few privileged spots in which the edenic imagery is strongly emphasized: Tilford Springs on the Peaks of Laurel where Jeff Dunbaugh and Lucius eat of the forbidden fruit ("a private oasis . . . shutting out the world and its weather," 37), Parcher's Cove, Beverly's "sanctuary," Pete and Julia's fragrant love nest. Lytle has seen to it that they appear located out of time and space, ideal edenic spots still further idealized and made unreal by the mist curling up from their sources, the moon-drenched atmosphere, or the dark green, almost vegetal light that suffuses them (see 37-39, 79-81, 137-38, 229, 323). They seem to exist beyond the seasons of this world ("the seasonless grove of cedars" in Parcher's Cove, 167), as intemporal as the drama that is being reenacted there, "the world simple as the first day," Pete and Julia, Jeff and Ruthy, Lucius and Ada Belle locked in each other's arms in that "one posture" out of "all the combinations possible," in which they strive to restore wholeness. But as in the enchanted Garden of the world, a "flaming sword" will forever bar the entrance to it: Duncan's knife

cutting across Pete's middle (140), "the flaming darts" of the rising sun on Lucius and Ada Belle (230).

Within these privileged edenic spaces, the tree and water effect a further reduction, very similar to those miniature Japanese landscapes where a tree, a pond, and a stone represent the universe. The different springs in the novel may of course evoke the four rivers of Eden (Genesis 2:10-14), whose fertilizing water enabled Adam to tend the Garden, or suggest the regenerating water of baptism for Lucius and Pete Legrand in "The Night Sea Journey," sources of life for both man and nature (*cf.* the flood in this last section which terminates the terrible August drought of the first four). For Ruthy and Ada Belle, the pagan wood nymphs, water conspires with its celestial sister, the moon, to restore to them a "too early forced" virginity (50, 81-82, 228-29). In the symbolic framework of the novel, however, water can also stand as a representation of the original chaos, as the description of the source on page 79 would suggest, "reflect[ing] the abyss beneath . . . the mystery and the terror, the sucking swirl," or that of the pond in front of the entrance to Parcher's Cove on page 104.

There are also many single trees in the novel, towering above their edenic environment, images of the Tree of Knowledge under which our first parents lost their innocence, but described in such a way as to evoke a more primordial origin, that of the Cosmic Tree of the World; thus the big "line tree" which kills Joe Cree after he has been told of Julia's infamous transgression "had stood from the time of man" (3). For Hopgood Schott, the crooked lumberman, it is indeed "the seed tree of the world" (149), evocative of the Yggdrasill of Germanic mythology or of that other tree that sprang out of Narayana's navel while he was slumbering in the all-pervading water of the Indian cosmology.¹³ Also strongly suggestive in their edenic symbolism are the fragrant cedars, "big and gray with age" (138) protecting Pete and Julia's lovemaking in the "triangular glade" of Parcher's Cove, but they are topped by "one large female tree," another possible image of the "seed tree" of the world. While waiting for Beverly to meet him in the "April woods," Jack has the vision of a tree growing out of the "gelid" stagnant water hiding the entrance to Parcher's Cove:

And now within the stilled monotony of his clairvoyance he

saw the high-branched tree growing upward from the abyss. As it grew it was grown, but nowhere could he make out where the roots fed, nor could he measure where the topmost branches paused in their growth, except the out-reaching arms, exfoliating, forever fell short of the pool's ceiling, that thin incandescent transparency between the outer and the inner parts. (105)

The "dull opacity" of the water, the "heavy green gloom" that suffuses the whole place, the temporary absence of life seem to bring him back to the origins of the world; "so, he thought, must the floor of the world have looked on the first day, its patina immaculate in the instancy of creation, that stilled pulsation of the polished film as the instant of time clicked and time began the myriad prick, sprouting" (104). The "high-branched tree" growing out of it turns into "the minute branches of a twelve-point buck" that later on materializes into a real stag, its "antlers thick in velvet" (111), which for the first time in the novel makes explicit the controlling image contained in the title. This "twelve-point buck" remains related to the image of the tree, as Lytle describes it swimming in the pool with "its twelve velvet points rock[ing] like the crown of a submerged sapling" (111), but it also bears upon the central representation of wholeness through the symbolic significance of the number twelve and its analogy to the unicorn. The number twelve, the product of the "feminine, motherly, physical" number four by the "masculine, fatherly, spiritual" number three,¹⁴ is ambiguous, both masculine and feminine and as such symbolic of wholeness (see the zodiac for instance); as for the horn, Lytle has explained its relevance to the controlling image in these terms:

In animal nature, the horn stands for both the masculine and feminine parts of being, the two aspects of the opposites which make a whole: the two in one contained by a single form. Add the velvet to this and you posit the state of innocence, that suspension before the act which continues the cycle of creation. At a certain moment the buck, out of the mystery of instinct, rubs the velvet off against the tree, and then he is ready for the rutting season. The velvet grows about the feminine end of the horn, and it bleeds as it is rubbed away. The blood is real, but the act symbolizes what

the other end of the horn will do.

And Lytle adds:

In human nature the horn's counterpart would be the hermaphrodite, Hermes and Aphrodite contained within the one form. Their separation, Eve taken from Adam's side, at another level continues the cycle of creation. (WN 185-86)

In the iconography of alchemy, the horn of the stag, both masculine and feminine in its outline, is related to the horn of the unicorn as symbol of the hermaphrodite Mercurius (*servus* or *cervus fugitivus*)¹⁵ in the same manner as the dove, the swan, and the jackass, which are also mentioned by Jack (and in the case of the ass, twice celebrated, on 120-21 and 354-55).

The horn image is used again for the "lightning horn" which, "piercing earth and firmament together" (259), seems to join them in the act of creation (in the scene immediately preceding that of Jack's hermetic vision of his brother and sister's incest):

A clap of thunder cracked the firmament; his eyelids flew open. He was standing upright before the lightning horn, piercing earth and firmament together. The ground shuddered slowly. Before him a plot of trees swayed apart. In the instant of illumination he felt he stood at a place, witnessing the world turn on its axis; but his eyes, as the light died into itself, showed him the horn upright among the parted trees, harder than granite, glistening like a shaft of salt. His eyeballs burned with a cold green light, in which faintly the horn still glowed, as out of the forehead of some fabulous beast, couched upon the earth as upon a soft and sweetly scented lap. (259)

The lightning horn, explicitly compared to the horn of "some fabulous beast" (whose glistening whiteness is directly reminiscent of the white radiance of that of the unicorn and which, incidentally, might have been the "lone beast" which was following Jack) is another representation of the cosmic tree or *axis mundi* joining earth and sky together for the initial act of auto-fecundation of the universe, and it is symptomatic that the three different forms of that "horn" that appear in the novel are all

symbols of the Undifferentiated Origins of the Universe, according to their various sources of interpretation: the "horn" of the stag or the unicorn, a representation of the androgynous Mercurius which was also *prima materia* or chaos¹⁶; Adam's "horn," which God took out of his side to create Eve, thus shattering the wholeness of our first parent; finally the "lightning horn" consummating the incestuous mating of the primordial couple Earth-Firmament, which, according to Mircea Eliade, is the beginning of so many primitive cosmogonies.¹⁷ With this last cosmic image, the fragrant loveliness of the Garden (cf. the idyllic scenes in Parcher's Cove: Beverly among his tamed stags, Pete and Julia asleep in each other's arms) is definitely left behind and forgotten, and the reader led back to the glaucous green glimmer of the primordial chaos when the *Uroboros*, impregnating himself, created sky and earth, which, mating, began the work of creation.

Fully aware of, and sympathetic to, that unconscious impulse that urges every man, every animal (the stag on 111, the treading turkeys on 128), the earth itself to reenact the "*blinding instant of oneness*" (95), Jack is quick to perceive its manifold manifestations and to explain them, or try to explain them, to Lucius. Well read in the classics and in Greek mythology, his preference seems to go to the cases of miraculous birth and conception ("The swan or the dove, which will it be, boys?" 45), and his imagination in this field runs riot during his two days on the Peaks of Laurel "of classic name and fame" (47), which he compares to Mount Olympus, with his cousin Eddie Dunbaugh's moonshine whisky making for nectar and ambrosia (44). Alluding to Leda's seduction, Jack playfully asks Ada Rutter: "Tell me, Miss Ada, do you recollect any such time you was asleep in the woods and roused up with great wings hovering and fluttering between you and a patch of sky?" (67). And indeed, Ada remembers a dream of that kind when peacefully asleep in a "locust grove," "an old gobbler was a-flogging [her]," out of which dream little Othel was born. That gods were once romping under various theriomorphic disguises—dove, swan, or the all-American turkey—to offer mortal ladies a taste of eternity, rather delights Jack, who jokes about it in a not too refined fashion, but his mood sobers up in front of the monstrous Madonna-and-child image of Ada Rutter cradling her freaky son Othel in her "apelike" arms. Discovering Othel crouched against a wall of Ada's kitchen in a "prenatal position, head between his knees, hands over his head, all a-tremble" (88)

because he fancies himself a grain of corn and is afraid of the only little black hen the Rutters keep in their farm, Jack again is quick to draw the comparison that forces itself upon him:

Miss Ada here . . . she's done beat the gods and the Fates, not to mention the womanfolks who for a thousand thousand years been trying to find out how to suck back a man with all his pounds, booted and spurred, back into the primordial dark and slime, where the weather's neither too hot nor too cold, too wet nor dry, just one long growing season.

Yes, sir, here the miracle's to be met . . . here on the Peaks of Laurel, here in Miss Ada's lap, and if you don't believe it, let me introduce you to little Othel, the man-fetus in person. Why there's nothing like it, all of us roosting here like a jury in its box, and the old sow eating Zeus, to drop him to eat him again. (90)

Jack feels carried "back in time, into the dark afterbirth of the world, where objects animate and inanimate pull together at the common dug" (66), where the great mother goddesses swallow their sons to give them birth again and begin anew the eternal cycle of creation. Lytle had read Frazer, and the myths of Tammuz-Adonis, of Attis and Osiris were not unknown to him, but it is Jung and Neumann who provided the archetype of self-fecundation and conception, the *Uroboros*, which in the eternity of ahistoric time endlessly devoured himself to be born again.¹⁸

This half-serious, half-jesting playing with the different myths of creation intended for Lucius's enlightenment, together with the other visions and revelations given to Jack, constitute the third narrative level of the novel, what we could call its mythonarrative, a most important element of the hermeneutic structure of *The Velvet Horn*. It requires some closer reading of course, but, as a seventeenth-century philosophical treatise has it, *habentis symbolum facilis est transitus*; "the passage is easy to those who possess the symbol."¹⁹ Such indeed is the reward that awaits those among the readers who have willingly entered with Lytle into the labyrinth he has devised for them and have come out of it safely. That so many of them did not quite make it and remained stuck with the devouring monster hidden in its depths may account for the relative public neglect that has kept the novel in the out-of-print limbo where it awaits a long overdue reimpression.

NOTES¹

¹*The Velvet Horn* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957). Page references for the quotations will be given parenthetically in the text of the article.

²"The Working Novelist and the Mythmaking Process," in *The Hero with the Private Parts* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1966), 191, 187. Further references to this essay, which deals with the composition of *The Velvet Horn*, will appear in the text of the article as WN followed by the page number.

³Carl Jung, *Psychologie und Alchemie* (Zurich: Rascher Verlag, 1944); the English edition was published by Princeton University Press in 1953.

⁴"The Image as Guide to Meaning in the Historical Novel," in *The Hero with the Private Parts*, 5, 9.

⁵Most of Lytle's writing on the "central image" is to be found in "The Image as Guide," "The Working Novelist," and "Caroline Gordon and the Historic Image," all in *The Hero with the Private Parts*. For a critical evaluation of Lytle's criticism, see George Core, "A Mirror for Fiction: The Criticism of Andrew Lytle," *Georgia Review* 20 (summer 1966), 208-21; and Robert Weston, "Toward a Total Reading of Fiction: The Essays of Andrew Lytle," *Mississippi Quarterly* 23 (fall 1970), 424-33.

⁶Lytle writes in full: "Was not the brotherhood of man supremely defined by the love of brother and sister, at least in symbolic terms? If they represent the two parts of the whole of experience, the effort to become one again must contain every kind of love which the separation had scattered throughout the world as man struggled to escape his fallen condition."

⁷Lytle's graphic or typographic devices for shifting the narrative back and forth in time, like starting a passage without capital letters, might make us ascribe this statement to Dickie, who is sitting with Jack in the dining room of their farm (the decor of the flashback of 'The Garment' section of "The Water Witch" following 'The Trace'), but we might also ascribe it to Beverly, thus ending the previous flashback, unless it is the inner voice of Jack, who relives both retrospective episodes.

⁸On the image of the woman in Lytle's work, see Nancy Joyner, "The Myth of the Matriarch in Andrew Lytle's Fiction," *The Southern Literary Journal* 7 (fall 1974), 67-77; my article, "Le mythe de la matriarche dans l'oeuvre de Andrew Lytle," *Caliban* (Toulouse), 18 (1980), 157-68; or for a fuller development, chapter VII of my dissertation, "Eve en ce Paradis, ou la femme dans l'oeuvre de Lytle," 503-41 ("Andrew Lytle et le mythe édénique," University Microfilms International 82-10,401).

⁹For Jack's different figures, see my dissertation, chapter VI, part III, "L'itinéraire spirituel de Jack Copleigh: Mort et transfiguration," 470-97.

¹⁰See the index to *Psychology and Alchemy* for the numerous references to Mercurius.

¹¹*Psychology and Alchemy*, par. 26.

¹²*Psychology and Alchemy*, par. 449.

¹³In the French edition of Mircea Eliade's *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Payot/Payothèque, 1974), 236-39.

¹⁴*Psychology and Alchemy*, par. 31.

¹⁵*Psychology and Alchemy*, par. 84; the whole passage on "The Paradigm of the Unicorn," par. 518-54, would be relevant here.

¹⁶*Psychology and Alchemy*, Part III, Chapter 4, "The Prima Materia."

¹⁷"Le couple primordial Ciel-Terre," *Traité d'histoire des religions*, 204-210.

¹⁸Lytle mentions having read Erich Neumann's *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (Zurich: Rascher Verlag, 1949) in its English translation, published in 1954 by the Bollingen Foundation.

¹⁹Quoted by Jung as an exergue to Part III of *Psychology and Alchemy*.